

North American Giant Crayfish Tales

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Crayfish are the ubiquitous crawdads or mudbugs found throughout North America, usually small enough to easily catch by hand (accompanying pinches more annoyance than pain). Crayfish are cosmopolitan, being native to the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Australasia. There are about 600 species worldwide, half of those native to North America. These crustaceans are important components of many freshwater systems (though there are a few species that have become invasive, expanding their range to the detriment of native species).

Most look like miniature lobsters, though the largest crayfish, the Tasmanian giant freshwater crayfish (*Astacopsis gouldi*), puts some lobsters to shame, with weights up to 13 lbs. In North America, crayfish are notably smaller. Species like the red swamp crayfish, *Procambarus clarkia*, may reach a little over six inches in total length. *Barbicambarus cornutus* (the bottlebrush crayfish) is probably the largest, known to reach lengths of up to 9 inches. (The bottlebrush crayfish has an interesting history of its own; described in 1884, it wasn't seen again until the 1960s. It is endemic to the Green River basin in Kentucky.) The smaller *Barbicambarus simmonsii* is only about 5 inches long, but was heralded as a "new giant species of crayfish" when it was discovered in Tennessee a few years ago.

Occasionally, reports of "giant crayfish" can be found in historical newspapers. Anything unusual in the natural world made for a popular paragraph for newspaper readers, so many editors (especially in rural areas) kept an ear out for those reports. But not all such crayfish were crayfish.

Freshwater prawns were sometimes mistaken for giant crayfish. There are a few larger species of native and introduced river prawns (*Macrobrachium*) that can be found, particularly in southern rivers and streams from Florida to Texas. *Macrobrachium carolinense*, the bigclaw river shrimp, is known to reach at least 12 inches in length. One biologist, Waldo Schmitt (Bassler et al 1931) noted: "Within the borders of the United States we have



CHAMP—The giant crayfish was taken near Stephensburg Lake, Hardin County, by O. G. Wilson, Jr., Louisville. The pencil in the picture is six and one-half inches long.

A large, but not extraordinary, crayfish from Hardin Co., KY.

Louisville, KY, *Courier-Journal*, August 29, 1948

a giant fresh-water shrimp, *Macrobrachium jamaicense* [now *carcinus*]. The largest specimen I know of weighed three pounds; its body length was ten and a half inches; the feelers, which were missing, were said to have been twenty-six and a half inches long; the larger claw of its sturdy pair measured thirteen and a quarter inches. It hailed from the Devil's River, Texas."

The following Texas crustaceans were almost certainly river prawns.

"Gonzales, Texas, July 5.—A monster crayfish was brought in Gonzales yesterday by George Greenhouse. Its claws measured twenty-five inches from tip to tip. One was thirteen and one-half inches while the other was not so long. It was caught in the Guadalupe river." (San Antonio, TX, *Light*, July 5, 1907)

"THIS CRAWFISH BIGGEST EVER—Winnie Walker, a well known San Antonio boy, holds the distinction of having caught the largest crayfish from the San Antonio. Yesterday afternoon he captured three, the largest of which measured twenty-two inches from the tip of the claws to the end of the tail. The two others measured ten and twelve inches each. The catch was made near First Mission, where Mr. Walker spent the day with relatives, who live near the river. It was while he was attempting to catch some small crayfish to be used as bait for fish that he succeeded in landing the largest crayfish ever caught in the river. It was of the soft shell variety. He brought the catch to the city last evening and exhibited it among his friends." (San Antonio, TX, *Light*, August 28, 1907)

"FIND FRESH WATER LOBSTER—Lockhart, Tex., July 30.—Messrs. Lea Beaty, Bruno Bock, Will Kreuz and Lee Lynch have placed on exhibition what they claim to be a fresh-water lobster which they caught in the Guadalupe River. From tip to tip the lobster measured 24 inches and is the largest one ever seen in this section." (San Antonio, TX, *Light*, July 30, 1917)

"BIG CRAYFISH CAUGHT—Runge. May 5.—A large crayfish, having a spread of 25 inches, was caught in the San Antonio river near here by a Mexican youth. It is the largest crayfish ever caught here and it attracted a great deal of attention when put on display at the Janacek grocery store." (San Antonio, TX, *Light*, May 5, 1933)



WHAT IS IT? Capt. B. Struck, whose 11-year-old ward caught the monster, thinks it's a freshwater lobster or shrimp. His ward, young James Roser, was fishing for catfish in the resaca adjoining Struck's home on Lazy Acres Road last week. (Herald Photo)

A Freshwater Prawn

Brownsville, TX, *Herald*, August 17, 1969



A PRAWN! WHAT'S A PRAWN? According to Andrew Spell, age 15, son of Mr. and Mrs. Bill Spell of Cuero, a prawn is a cross between a crayfish and a shrimp. Young Spell caught just such a critter Sunday in the Guadalupe River about five miles out of Cuero. The prawn measured 27 inches from pincer to pincer. It is ironic that the lobster-like beast was caught this far north because they are mainly found in South America. Spell reports the prawn is edible...according to the encyclopedia but he doesn't plan to dine on his. He said it put up quite a fight after latching onto the shrimp bait and "it even tried to attack us when we got him in the boat," the lad concluded.

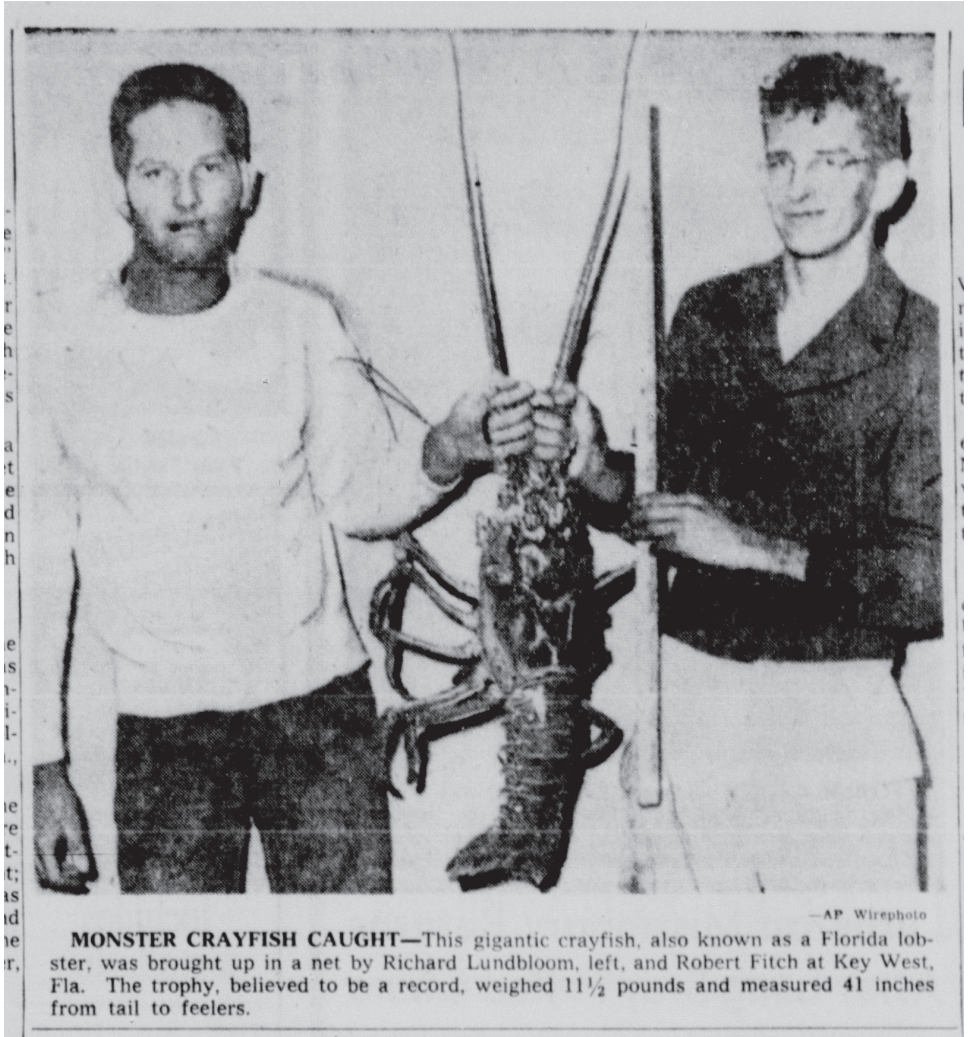
(Staff Photo)

A Freshwater Prawn (Correctly Identified)

Cuero, TX, *Daily Record*, August 7, 1973

In other cases, particularly when the “crayfish” is captured in brackish or marine habitat, a reported giant crayfish is likely a rock lobster or similar crustacean. For example:

“Ol’ Papa Épicé astounded Louisiana in 1934, but let’s not forget that for publicity’s sake the accepted measurement of 6 feet included his antennae. More accurate reports claim that the actual length from head to tail was 3 feet, 4 inches and weight was somewhere around 30lbs. Nonetheless



A Rock Lobster

Racine, WI, *Journal Times Sunday Bulletin*, November 20, 1960

these numbers are impressive since no other American cray reaches anywhere near these proportions. Since the species was never recorded doubts of authenticity suggest that the cray may have been a marine lobster introduced into a brackish swamp pool. DNA testing of the carapace has been inconclusive thus far.” (Anon 2004)

Similarly, this next one is undoubtedly a rock lobster, which are called crayfish in some parts of the Caribbean.

“A monster crayfish measuring over three feet in length and weighing 80 pounds was captured recently off the Florida coast.” (Monroe, LA, *News Star*, March 28, 1922)

More unusual are the following accounts.

“A giant crustacean of unknown species, but which must from all its appearance must be the father of all lobsters from the beginning of time, was found in a scoopful of sand and stone at the excavation at the big Wachusett dam at Clinton recently. It is 31 ½ inches long, and nobody in Clinton has ever seen any fresh water creature like it.” (Boston, MA, *Daily Globe*, November 12, 1901)

“Saranac Lake *Dispatch* to the New York *World*.

“While angling for bullheads, J. R. Tait and Charles Wendlekin hooked and landed a strange crayfish, which has since been called a lobster by persons who say they know what they are talking about.

“It has the claws, tail, legs, and long smellers, and is the color of a lobster. It is a young one, and has attracted much attention, because it is the first of its kind ever caught in the fresh waters of the Adirondacks.

“L. R. Bolton, of Boston, formerly interested in Maine lobsteries, says the fish is a lobster, and the first he ever knew to be found in fresh water. He says there must be others in the upper Saranac, and the catch will be brought to the attention of the State culturist.” (Washington *Post*, June 26, 1911)

Even stranger, large chicken-catching crayfish:

“CARRIED A FRYER DOWN INTO HOLE

“For generations untold the lowly crawfish has raised his sons and daughters along the lovely vales of Brush Creek, near Princeton, says the Bluefield Telegraph, and no one has ever suspected he was otherwise than a most peaceful citizen. The only depredations of which he has hitherto been accused were those connected with various nocturnal raids on corn fields just when the corn had come out of the ground. It is said that at such times he had been known to issue from his subterranean castle, and ruthlessly cut down corn, dragging it back with him to his den. It remains for our local fellow citizen, Attorney W. W. Rogers, to inject a doubt as to the herbageous habits of the crawfish, Mr. Rogers having stated the crawfish is as fond of chicken as the average Methodist circuit rider.

“Mr. Rogers, the first of this week, was over in Raleigh county in the neighborhood of Mabscott. He, with some other gentlemen, was passing the home of a citizen of Raleigh who dwelt in a flat at Mabscott. They noticed the sturdy Raleigh citizen industriously digging in his yard with a buttock. The man wiped the sweat off his brow and informed Mr. Rogers and friends a crawfish had stolen one of his chickens and he was digging him out. He stated he saw the crawfish slip up out of his hole and he was going to have that crawfish and chicken if it took a week to get it. Then he turned to his digging, while Mr. Rogers and his friends, doubting the story, stood and watched developments. After digging down some two feet the man found his quarry, and pulling it out, behold, there was a monster crawfish holding still in one of his claws a chicken some two or three weeks old. The crawfish had dragged the chicken down to his home and drowned it in the water at the bottom of the hole.

“The surprise of Mr. Rogers and his friends at such plain evidence of the depravity of the crawfish is responsible for the telling of the story on the return of Mr. Rogers to his home before. Insofar as known, the Mercer county crawfish has never been known to develop such carnivorous traits. But, still, this love for fleshy foods may account for many mysterious disappearances of chickens, dogs, cats and other pets in and about town.

“No one heretofore has suspected our crawfish to be other than feeders on vegetation. The valleys about town are filled with them, more or less. It is known that wolves and wildcats and squirrels

once inhabited these valleys, but they have disappeared. Then, too, many chickens have disappeared from numerous coops on the borders of the valley. Many dogs and cats have gone into the valley and failed to return. Still no one ever suspected the crawfish might be connected with all these disappearances which to date have been unaccounted for. No, the crawfish must hereafter be viewed with suspicion. His tribe must bear the stigma of flesh eaters and chicken thieves. The fair vale just below town, which bears the name of this freshwater crustacean, and which has added so much dignity, respectability, wealth, and loveliness to Mercer county, must now hang its head in shame over the depraved, degenerate character exhibited by the Raleigh county crawfish. We could wish that Mr. Rogers had never gone to Raleigh, that he had never repeated this tale of what he saw in the door yard of the Mabscott home. And there is no way in which we can figure prohibition had anything to do with it; hence these tears.” (Beckley, WV, *Sunday Register*, August 1, 1926)

“CRAB GETS CHICK—Pomeroy. June 25.—Screaming at the top of its voice for help, a week-old chick was seen disappearing into a hole in the yard at the C. M. Vining home on Wolf Pen Creek, back of Pomeroy, yesterday by Mrs. Helen Vining, wife of the owner of the premises. She ran to the rescue, but by the time she reached the scene of the disturbance the chick had gone down into the hole so far that she could not get it out. Quickly finding a hoe she dug around the chick until she could get a hold on it and hauled it out, only to find a giant crayfish hanging to one leg of the struggling chick. When rescued, the chick was still alive, but had one leg cut half off by the saw-like claws of the hen-yard robber.” (Athens, OH, *Messenger*, June 25, 1929)

While we know that new species of crayfish, even distinctive ones, are still being discovered in North America (for example, the zebra crayfish, *Cambarus clairitae*, described this year in Alabama (Schuster and Taylor 2016)), we are still awaiting solid evidence for a truly large North American crayfish (say, 12 inches in total length at least). But perhaps, in some small isolated watershed, a pair of formidable yet undescribed pincers await discovery . . .

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